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ABSTRACT

A study of the vocabulary adequacy of college students using words from a daily newspaper duplicated an earlier study using words from "Reader's Digest" which indicated a low level of adequacy. Two groups of 295 and 397 college juniors and seniors in teacher education courses indicated on a list of 80 words taken from a daily newspaper which ones they were sure they could pronounce and which ones they were sure they could define. Subjects were then asked to define or pronounce randomly selected words from those they had checked. Results indicated that the two groups could actually pronounce 50.8% and 52.3% respectively of the 80 words, and could actually define 19% and 18.75% respectively of the same 80 words. The study concluded that college students are not good at pronouncing words, but can pronounce more words than they can define. Also, they have little knowledge about meanings of words taken out of context, but apparently believe that if you can pronounce a word, you can read it. Improved methods for teaching vocabulary and greater demands on student achievement are needed to increase students' reading comprehension ability. (SRT)

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A STUDY OF THE ADEQUACY OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' VOCABULARY FOR READING THE DAILY PAPER

by

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This article reports research on the vocabulary adequacy of college students using words from a daily newspaper. Similar research using words from an issue of Reader's Digest (Greif, 1984) indicated an unexpectedly low level of adequacy. To the extent that the vocabulary level used in the newspaper differs from that in Reader's Digest, and is more common to typical everyday printed material, the results may be different.

Previous research on vocabulary adequacy is not abundant, as is indicated by Robinson and Johnson. They did a study of the ability of 30 students, ages 8 to 17, to read (pronounce) and define 30 basic math terms, including a) process words (addition, regrouping, etc.), b) direction words (solve, complete the equation, etc.), and c) numerical words (six, fifty-four, etc.). They found that only two of the thirty students could pronounce and define all 30 terms. None of the students could pronounce from print a group of terms considered basic to problem solving, which included such terms as, find the difference, measure, and solve. They indicated that even the older students couldn't define nor pronounce from print terms they knew they'd previously encountered in math classes (Robinson and Johnson, 1982).

The New Research

The background scenarios for this study and for the study using words from Reader's Digest were very similar. For this study a list of 80 words was taken from the first three pages of one daily issue of the Daily Pantagraph (circulation about 55,000). They were selected because it was thought that a large majority of high school

students would know neither their pronunciation nor their meaning. Several colleagues reviewed the list, to the same conclusion. The words were put onto a list with two columns of blanks, one for meaning, one for pronunciation. The directions were as follows:

> For each of the words on the following list, 1) Decide whether or not you are sure you know the correct pronunciation. If you are sure, place a check mark in the blank opposite the word in the "pronunciation" column.
>
> Then 2) Decide whether or not you are sure you know a correct meaning for each of the words, and if you are sure, check mark the blank opposite the word in the "meaning" column. (You have a correct meaning if it is quick, clear and you fairly quickly can tell it in words.)
>
> After you have finished you will be asked to pronounce and/or define randomly selected words.
>
> Try to limit yourself to about three seconds per word for each decision.

After students finished checking, each was given a random pattern of the words he personally checked as knowing the meaning, and was asked to write a definition or description (give any of several meanings), or use them in context. This is a very liberal meaning test. Each person gave meaning for twelve words. Then each student made an appointment to pronounce every word he personally checked as knowing the pronunciation.

The study was done in two stages. In stage one, which was done during the 1978-79 and 1979-80 school years, the respondents were 295 students who were college juniors and seniors in teacher education courses. These were essentially the same students as the 298 who took part in the first stage of the study using Reader's Digest words. The results for stage one were such that I thought an immediate replication should be done for double assurance.

The second stage was done in exactly the same way, during the 1980-81, 1981-82 and 1982-83 school years, and with a group of 397 students who were juniors and seniors in teacher education courses, being the respondents. Again these were almost identically the same students as the 388 who took part in the second stage of the study using Reader's Digest words.

Findings on Pronunciation Ability

Findings on these college students' ability to pronounce the 80 words taken from a daily paper are shown below:

	Group of 295	Group of 397
Average number of the 80 words the students claimed they could pronounce	48 words	49 words
Average percent of correct pronunciation for words they claimed they could pronounce	84.7%	85.2%
Average number of the 80 words they "actually" could pronounce (48 x 84.7%, etc.)	40.6 words	41.8 words
Average percent of the 80 words they "actually" could pronounce (40.6 - 80, etc.)	50.8%	52.3%

Findings on Knowledge of Meaning

Findings on their knowledge of the meaning of the 80 words taken from a daily paper are:

	Group of 295	Group of 397
Average number of the 80 words for which they claimed to know a meaning	26.9 words	26.8 words
Average percent of correct meaning for samples of words checked as knowing a meaning	56.4%	56.5%
Average number of the 80 words for which they "actually" knew a meaning (26.9 x 56.4, etc.)	15.2 words	15.1 words
Average percent of the 80 words for which they "actually" knew a meaning (15.2 - 80, etc.)	19%	18.75%

Findings Summary Statement

According to the procedures used, these two groups of 295 and 397 college students could pronounce 50.8% and 52.3% respectively of the 80 words, and knew a meaning for 19% and 18.75% respectively, of the same 80 words.

It should be noted that students responded to these words in a list, and not in context, but surprisingly enough, students didn't object to that. Most everyone seemed to indicate that context support to meaning is in terms of what they think makes sense, which they often found to be quite different from the author's intention. Many were almost adamant that knowing meanings only in context just isn't good enough for quick, efficient reading when accurate comprehension is required, which probably is all the reading we do, even most of our leisure reading.

While the results may be surprisingly low, they are almost identical, percentage-wise, to those obtained in the studies using a list of 199 words from one issue of Reader's Digest.[1]

Granting that these students are representative of college students in general, and that the 80 words are representative of daily paper words in general[2], some conclusions seem indicated. College students:

1. are not very good at pronouncing words--in fact, very poor at it.
2. nonetheless, are much better at pronouncing words than at knowing the meaning of words.
3. have an appallingly low knowledge of meaning of words when they are not in context.
4. have learned best what they were taught most (all but a rare few indicated they learned to read with a heavy phonics emphasis during the first several years).

Several Other Conclusions

If pronunciation is important in reading, then vastly improved methods for teaching it, and/or greater demands on students' achievements are needed.

If a meaning vocabulary is important in reading, then vastly improved methods for teaching it, and/or greater demands on students' achievements are needed. In this study any one correct

[1]In this study 199 words from one issue of Reader's Digest were used. Student groups were 298 and 388 in number. Percents of correct pronunciation were 50.7 and 52%, and for meaning 18 and 18.6% of the 199 words, using the same procedure as used in this study.

[2]They most likely are representative since most papers rely heavily on wire services terminology.

meaning was all that was required. Many students said that one meaning is not enough, that you need to know multiple meanings for words that have them, and that you use context to tell which of those multiple meanings to use. That is good insight!

There is another conclusion that is speculative. Many of the writers for daily newspapers these days are college graduates with journalism backgrounds. They choose vocabulary to do the best technical justice to the subject which they write about, and it does appear that their word choices are technically correct. In this "do my own thing" world they may very well forget to keep in mind their readership's ability to deal with the words they use. Daily papers are quite likely no longer written at a 6, 7, or 8th grade vocabulary level, as it has long been claimed. In a class discussion about these issues, one student said, "Now you know why we just 'wing' it when we don't know meanings, otherwise we'd never get out of the dictionary."

Author's Personal Comments

For years I have been observing what college students do when they don't know a word while reading. Almost always they ask someone "What does this word say?" Someone pronounces the word for them, and they go on reading. Apparently, they believe that if you can pronounce the word you can read it. But this research indicates they do not know a meaning (not even one meaning, much less several or all) for anywhere near the number of words they can pronounce. The above procedure is also what most adults, and elementary school children do when they don't know a word in the text.

I am reminded of a remark a first grader made in a puzzled tone of voice to a teacher in October, 1972, and that was, "I don't hear it saying anything!"

But everybody using that procedure isn't so surprising, is it? We've taught them that. When a child or anyone needs help to read a word, how often, instead of pronouncing the word for him, do you instead of just pronouncing it, describe its meaning frequently relating it to some experience or experience-based meaning the child already has?[1] From what I see it is rarely, if ever, done. But this may change. A surprising number of today's education majors in my classes, at least, have taken a foreign language, and that has helped them to understand that pronouncing the word isn't enough to read it.

In the past the priority of teaching comprehension in reading programs has been almost nil (see Durkin, 1979). I am convinced we need to make comprehension the number one priority in reading programs. Comprehension means using the words, grammar and punctuation on the page to trigger off the mental processes which produce a duplicate of the author's message. This requires, first, among several things, the possession of an adequate word-meaning vocabulary. One 4th grade remedial reading student once remarked to me, "I don't have any trouble with the words I know." Neither does

[1]For example, "a large electric kitchen appliance that keeps some foods cold, some frozen, and makes ice cubes," or "a piece of athletic equipment made of padded leather you can wear like a glove so your hand won't sting when you catch fast balls."

anyone else! And the more words we know, the less trouble we have reading anything that is reasonably well written.

In your efforts to make meaning vocabulary the number one objective in your reading program, you may not find much help from basic reading series materials, as the scope and sequence charts show (see Durkin, 1981). However, let the publishers know what you need. They appear ready to be responsive if enough teachers let them know.

Let us begin to make comprehension priority number one in reading, and meaning vocabulary priority number one in the comprehension program. Who could even imagine any parent or principal (or anyone else) complaining that you teach the children the meanings of too many words! Who could even imagine it?

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